

Congratulations to Nigar Sultana Joty and her team for showing such strong character. They've performed when it mattered. They have shown that they have the nerve to deal with the most difficult of situations. They didn't give up when everyone else did.



Nazmul Abedeen Fahim
a revered figure in the sporting fraternity



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

A stride in the right direction

"I think we have taken a respectable step forward after this series. There were many who didn't know us, apart from one or two players. At least those people now recognise who Nahida, Pinky or Marufa are. So, I think this is an achievement since the people of Bangladesh now know who plays in the women's team," said Joty.

KHALID HOSSAIN

Since acquiring the ODI status and stepping into the international scene in 2011, Bangladesh women's team had their crowning achievement with the 2018 Asia Cup victory.

To still be the only team to break India's monopoly in the prestigious continental event remains a monumental feat, also considering that the men's team are yet to taste such success.

Although Bangladesh women found stable ground, they were found wanting in the subsequent three T20 World Cups.

Their maiden appearance at the ODI World Cup last year, however, brought a sense of renewed promise. A win against Pakistan and two closely contested affairs over two big guns – West Indies and South Africa – allowed the Tigresses to make their presence felt at the global stage.

However, with the Asia Cup triumph far in the past, the women cricketers longed to come up with a breakthrough performance. The recently concluded white-ball series

against India at home presented a glorious opportunity for the Tigresses to prove a point or two in front of their fans.

Across three T20s and as many ODIs, there were a lot of boxes ticked in Bangladesh women's favour; ones that have the necessary advertising ingredients to rally up the cricket-crazy fans who rarely fail to show up in numbers whenever the men's team play an international match.

In their first-ever home series, the Tigresses showed they can fight neck and neck with India, who were not meant to be intimidated by the playing conditions here. Surpassing expectations of a one-off victory indicated the women in red and green have come of age.

Overall, Bangladesh's spirited performance, their attitude in victory and

defeat was in stark contrast to how India captain, Harmanpreet Kaur, tainted the spirit of the game with her antics in the final fixture that culminated in a thrilling tie.

The icing on the cake for Bangladesh arrived with stellar individual displays. In pacer Marufa Akter, whose pumping action complements her inspirational backstory, the country has found another superstar in the making. A clip of her boundary-saving effort in the field had gone viral, and a brilliantly executed inswinger to bowl out India opener, Priya Punia, in the second ODI had captured the imagination of audiences.

Moreover, the country's leading international run-scorer, Fargana Haque Pinky, entered the record books by being the first Bangladeshi woman to score an ODI century. Marufa and Pinky – who alongside spinner Nahida Akter broke into the top 20's in ICC rankings in their respective fields – had therefore made the impact needed to break some inertia of fan-following and media coverage.

The Bangladesh captain aptly expressed the key

takeaway from the series. "I think we have taken a respectable step forward after this series. There were many who didn't know us, apart from one or two players. At least those people now recognise who Nahida, Pinky or Marufa are. So, I think this is an achievement since the people of Bangladesh now know who plays in the women's team," said Nigar Sultana Joty.

The cricketers have played their cards to the best of their abilities and for the Tigresses, irrespective of whatever outcomes may be in store in the foreseeable future, the stage is set for their next phase of evolution.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) can be presumed to be well aware of the to-dos in this regard: for starters, ensuring that the domestic circuit runs on at the highest possible level.

As the global women's sport continues its successful march to a much-increased viewership and wage structure in place, it remains to be seen how long it takes before the cricketers see the gender pay gap eliminated and get to entertain a full house. In reality, however, the latter is a precursor to the former.

'Got the exposure we always craved'

After leading her side to a historic achievement against a strong India in their recent white-ball series at home, Bangladesh women's cricket team skipper Nigar Sultana Joty spoke to Mazhar Uddin of *The Daily Star*, sharing her plans, the areas Bangladesh need to improve, and how the women's cricket in the country could move forward. Here are the excerpts from the interview:

The Daily Star (DS): As a captain, what was your message to the girls before the series?

Nigar Sultana Joty (NSJ): I told them that we don't get enough opportunity to play in Mirpur and that fans do not find much interest to watch the games when we play in Sylhet or Chattogram. But when we played in Mirpur, we got the exposure which we always craved. As we also play for Bangladesh, not getting the usual focus and attention feels bad.

DS: Did you notice any change in attitude from the Indian players after ODI victory?

NSJ: I felt their mindset was different as they are a big side with a good domestic structure. So, I think they did not expect that we could play better cricket against them. I felt that they could not really accept the outcome which is the reason behind the drama that had unfolded in the end [instigated by India captain Harmanpreet Kaur].

DS: Where do you want to see this team from here?

NSJ: Since the women cricketers do not get any individual sponsors and endorsements, it's the board that supports us financially. So, when the board says they will do more for us, it actually motivates us immensely. I think we have taken the right step forward but I feel we still have a long way to go. I think if we can minimise a few of our flaws, we can get better. So, my goal is to remain in the present and follow the process.

DS: Tell us about young pacer Marufa Akter.

NSJ: When Marufa first came to the national team, I had the belief that she would do something for Bangladesh. She has that spark in her and I have followed her right from the beginning, and she got the guts. I think she will not only become a big asset for Bangladesh but also one of the best bowlers in world cricket.

DS: Do you have any suggestions to improve the domestic cricket of Bangladesh?

NSJ: I think we need more matches in the domestic circuit and also we need a T20 tournament. We have already requested the board about this and maybe you have already heard that the board is planning to introduce the women's [Bangladesh Premier League] BPL. If we have the BPL, our doors for the other franchise leagues will also open. I had the experience of playing abroad and it helps us to communicate with the players from across the world and gain experience. The more competitive matches we play, the more it will help us play well in international cricket.

DS: Your message to the girls who aspire to be professional cricketers and also their families?

NSJ: I think the struggle that girls had to go through to play cricket has somewhat ended, and the success against India will only have a bigger impact. The way we are heading, I think we are making things easier for the next generation who will gain more flexibility. I would like to welcome those who are willing to take cricket as a profession. I think women's cricket in Bangladesh is in a very good state as you can get financially benefited and it is also safe. The first thing a girl or their family thinks is whether it's safe or not and I can say it's a very safe and respectable place for the girls.



Marufa Akter has emerged as the new sensation in Bangladesh women's cricket team. The youngster from Nilphamari was instrumental behind the Tigresses' maiden ODI win against India, picking up four wickets in the opening match of the three-match series recently. The 18-year-old pacer then held her nerve to defend three runs in the final over in the final ODI as Bangladesh tied the game and drew the series 1-1. Marufa spoke in detail to *The Daily Star's* Mazhar Uddin, opening up about her bowling, life, future plans among many other topics during an exclusive interview, the excerpts of which are as follows:

From being taunted to being admired

The Daily Star (DS): Did you set any target for yourself before the series against India?

Marufa Akter (MA): It was always my dream to play at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur, and before the start of the series I said to myself that if I got the opportunity I would give my best. I actually didn't see the names or faces of the opposition players. I tried to maintain my line and length and all went well.

DS: How did it feel playing in front of a family member?

MA: It was probably one of the best moments of my life, especially when you get to see your brother watching you play from the stands, that too after travelling a long way [from Nilphamari].

DS: What is the reaction in your hometown?

MA: To be honest there are not many girls in my village who would want to be a cricketer as most of those of my age have got married already.

DS: Let's hear about your bowling.

MA: When I started off, it was all natural. Maybe it was not at the best

of shapes but as things progressed, I started to work on various aspects of my bowling. My coaches helped me a lot and day by day my pace has increased while the line and length have improved. I also had the urge to reach the top and followed the instructions of my coaches.

DS: You took four wickets in Bangladesh's first ODI win against India. Tell us about that game.

MA: I was eager to contribute to my team's success. I was backed by my captain [Nigar Sultana] Joty apu as she always encouraged me by saying that I am the best bowler in the team. She also told me to just maintain my line and length as she felt the opposition won't be able to play me properly. I felt the same too. I bowled according to the line and length and it worked.

DS: What did you think when you had three runs to defend in the final over in the third ODI?

MA: Joty apu told me to keep belief in yourself. When they got two runs off the first two balls, I felt that I shouldn't get nervous, instead the

batters should get nervous.

DS: Who do you follow as a bowler?
MA: I follow Hardik Pandya. In Bangladesh, I follow Mustafizur Rahman bhai. Many say that I am the female Mustafizur (smiles).

DS: Where do you want to see yourself in future?

MA: My target is to play in IPL, Big Bash, CPL, etc. Hope that I can perform for Bangladesh and give my best.

DS: What would be your message to young girls who want to play cricket?

MA: There will be hurdles from family and society. The desire must come from within yourself, and if you have the urge to become something, you have to work hard for it. I faced a lot of hurdles in my life but I was able to overcome those. People used to taunt me when I started playing since I was the only girl from my area playing cricket. But now when I go to my village, people come to see me and it feels good. People now tell my mother that they never imagined that her daughter would reach the top.

STATISTICS

Bangladesh women's record in ODIs:

Played	Won	Lost	Tied	No Result
57	15	36	1	5

Bangladesh women's record in T20Is:

Played	Won	Lost	Tied	No Result
102	39	63	0	0

HUNDREDS FOR BANGLADESH WOMEN IN INTERNATIONAL CRICKET:

Name	Format	Runs	Balls	Opposition	Date
Nigar Sultana	T20I	113*	65	Maldives	5 Dec, 2019
Fargana Haque	T20I	110*	53	Maldives	5 Dec, 2019
Fargana Haque	ODI	107	160	India	22 July, 2023

